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Violent Effects: Domestic Violence and Poetic Subversive Discourses

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Es batalla que tenemos que librar las mujeres puertorriqueñas, pero en otro campo. En el campo de la cultura y la dignidad. Y es aquí donde tu boca a tu querida hermana, venir a aportar tu cooperación.

JUANITA AROCHO

Abstract: Processes of sociosexual geo-racialization consistently render Latinas in the U.S. vulnerable to domestic abuse. Engaging this issue, third space feminists have adapted *testimonio* as a means for exposing domestic abuse while striving to craft transformative discourses that humanize these women's experiences of oppression. The dusmic nature of poetry, as defined by Nuyorican poets, lends itself to this task. "Violent Effects" synthesizes poetry's dusmic nature with third space feminists' development of *testimoniando*—or *testimonio* as an agentic process—to identify how María Luisa Arroyo's poetry exposes, dignifies and humanizes survivors' experiences of domestic violence and thereby subverts dehumanization's violent effects.

Key Terms: Testimonio, Dusmic, Domestic Abuse, Boricua, Sociosexual Geo-racialization, Subversion

Currently, no comprehensive statistics exist regarding the rates of domestic violence among Latinas in the United States. *Alianza*, the National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence, cites issues such as language barriers and fear of judicial re-crimination due to citizenship status as some of the factors preventing Latinas from reporting domestic violence.¹ Born of systemic power structures, two fundamental questions emerge regarding this silencing of domestic violence victims and survivors: 1) whether its prevalence as a component of Latina identity in the United States is symptomatic of a general apathy that refutes Latina humanity, and 2) do subversive discourses exist that counteract the dehumanizing effects of this silencing? To answer these questions, I examine the poetry of María Luisa Arroyo, who was born in Puerto Rico and currently resides in Massachusetts, to identify the vitality of poetry to create dusmic *testimoniando* that combats domestic violence as evinced in her 2008 collection, *Gathering Words/Recogiendo palabras*. In each of the following sections, I analyze the poems "invisible women at the shelter," "days of dirt," and "gathering words"—respectively—to identify how bridging the potential for healing borne within dusmic poetry and the enactment of *testimonio*, can constitute a praxis of humanization within the creation of select Latinas' poetry. Specifically, "invisible

women at the shelter" depicts the testimonios of women in a domestic abuse shelter; "days of dirt" continues this theme by portraying experiences of racial violence within shelters; and "gathering words" identifies the potential created within grappling with the praxis of *testimoniando*.

I begin this article with the awareness that underlying the aforementioned questions is the need to better understand the apathy that enables violence against Latinas. Pinpointing Latina flesh experiences as manifestations of structural sociosexual geo-racialization opens a pathway to expose racialized misogyny and its cultural valences. As such, I draw on Chicana third space feminist theorists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh," first officially documented in the groundbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*, from 1981.² In this anthology, Moraga and Anzaldúa assert that "[a] theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience" (21). To theorize how power is imprinted on the flesh is to define a complex matrix of power that governs every facet of existence and shapes the life choices available for different individuals while moving beyond current concepts of social construction. For Latinas in the United States who face domestic abuse as a particular

manifestation of a larger social dehumanizing process, the issue of a humanizing discourse therefore takes on political implications even as it also struggles to bring that discourse to fruition.

Testimonio offers one avenue for exposing and subverting domestic violence against Latinas. Testimonio, emerging as part of a twentieth century indigenous Latin American resistance to genocide, emerges from non-Western-European epistemologies intermingled with outrage over structural violence created by sociosexual geo-racializations. Attempts to delegitimize *testimoniadoras* have emerged in the form of attacks on who is allowed to speak, control knowledge and define the meaning of “truth,” as recognizable in charges posited by authors such as David Stoll and Daphne Patai.³ Given the reality of tensions emerging from attempted destabilization of power structures that testimonio threatens, I posit that testimonio holds potential as a discursive avenue by which Latina third space feminists can use to expose dehumanizing processes. However, it is also one that must shift shapes to expose structural violence *and* subvert its dehumanizing structures, and simultaneously expose how and why these structures seek to silence Latinas.

The Latina Feminist Group identifies how it takes on this task of transforming testimonio to depict their experiences as Latinas in the U.S. by constituting their “own *testimonio* process, in which the personal and private became profoundly political” (13). What emerges is the concept of *testimoniando*, or the active giving of testimonio as sentient beings (12). These women, whose communities have historically been colonized, violated, dislocated, and oppressed and influenced by processes of sociosexual geo-racialization in the U.S., transform testimonio from a genre into a *praxis*. Importantly, these Latinas come from a position of privilege as academics. However, rather than constitute a hierarchy of oppression, this article instead seeks to identify how these U.S.-based Latinas draw from their own social consciousness as it has been formed by different circumstances arising out of the structures with which they grapple and that are different than those of Latin America. Significantly, Patricia Zavella defines *testimoniando* as potentially being a “tool for *concientización*” or a technique that can lead to a new type of wisdom and knowledge (354). The decision to change and individualize the methods of creating their testimonios becomes key: subversion of structural power via the creation of humanizing strategies.

Testimoniando—the act of giving/creating testimonio—also allows writers to work with different genres such as poetry as a means to best explicate how they understand and define their experiences. *Testimoniando* as a praxis also includes the potential for healing from oppression, and therefore recalls the dsmic power of poetry, which Nuyorican poets Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero have described as the ability to envision transformative consciousness and map alternative ways of knowing by transforming the aggression directed at a person/people into their strength (*Nuyorican Poetry*, 127). The power that emerges from this process of personalizing discursive maneuverings presents a radical shift in how women of color, and specifically for this article, Puerto Rican women, can navigate the constraints of structural violence that lead to domestic violence.

LATINA RESILIENCE

In 1975, Algarín and Piñero argued that “the Nuyorican poet fights with words” (24). Indeed, I agree that poetry can act as the tool with which the dominated within oppressive structures can articulate a refusal to be dehumanized. Linked with this insight is Audre Lorde’s claim in 1977 that the “quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live,” and is further exemplified by her awareness of how “[i]t is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt” (36). Poetry can represent a politico-cultural expression of humanity through *testimoniando*. Questions emerge, however, regarding why and how poetry offers such a tactical subversion to processes of objectification. Algarín and Piñero describe how “when we as poets come upon a man who disputes our use of words, we are in a match where we insist on our right to make our words communicate our experience” (24). Poetry, in having the ability to articulate these experiences, produces strength with which to fight dehumanizing processes that seek to deny the oppressed a source with which to demand recognition of their sentient integrity. Lorde continues by expressing how “as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-[E]uropean consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to

respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes” (37). As an expression of that awareness, poetry offers a creative strategy for self-identification. The very nature of poetry—an art form involved in the complicated and complex maneuverings of phonemes into combinations that convey meaning and intent—itself is both symbolic of the layers of meaning that theorizing grapples with while also reflecting something deeper than regurgitation of known forms and information: It contains within it a deep wisdom and knowledge.

Arroyo’s depictions in “invisible women at the shelter” elucidate the value of poetic *testimoniando* as 1) a discursive praxis that identifies institutional violence that manifests in the home, and 2) provides humanizing strategies. Arroyo’s poem depicts the first value by demonstrating that poetry is necessary—to use Lorde’s conception of its vitality—both to identify how power works while also using *dusmic* poetry to humanize the exploited “object” of oppression. This poem, which explores the experiences of domestic abuse suffered by several women in a shelter, illustrates how poetic constructs rehumanize the objectified flesh of women and how social structuring of race and gender render some women specifically vulnerable to domestic violence.

This poem utilizes a variety of linguistic techniques to artistically portray the complex history of dehumanization that Puerto Rican women face. Broken into five sections marked out by Roman numerals, part I of this poem begins with the statement, “[a]fter the fireworks, he strangled me. / His drunken thumbprints tattoo my throat” (1-2). Although potentially written with the narrator functioning as “me,” the title of the poem suggests that this statement comes from one of the other women in the shelter. The diction portraying the violence suffered by this woman—the vividness of tattooing drunken fingerprints onto a neck—defies dehumanization and instead creates a visceral experience that is tactile as well as visual. Mercedes Olivera describes how “[v]iolence against women, an expression of men’s power, is present in various forms and degrees throughout women’s lives. As a naturalized part of the culture, symbols, institutional functioning and cultural prescriptions, it shapes identities and internalizes subjectivities” (50). It is a well-argued fact that patriarchy can—and does—institutionalize *and* legitimize gender violence. Yet, the narrator’s description of the attempted strangling, how the “thumbprints tattoo

my throat,” illustrates a unique way to describe her experiences of this violence and also her own knowledge—born in and of the flesh—of it. This description depicts the praxis of “*testimoniando*—telling our stories ... Initially, we addressed the following key questions ... How have we made *testimonio* the core of our work? What are some important turning points of consciousness? ... What are we transgressing?” (Latina Feminist Group, 12). Poetic language elucidates the stakes for the woman describing her experiences of violence. The strangulation acts as a lesson, one that is learned in the flesh, that she is available for murder due to her positionality. The bruises on her throat could have done more than restrict the narrator’s breathing: she would have also been unable to tell what had happened to her. With no speaking witness, the man who had harmed her would never be brought to justice—even if that justice can only be provided by a poem.

Indeed, the nature of *dusmic* *testimoniando* is to identify the potential threat that is posed to Latinas within processes of sociosexual geo-racialization as well as emphasize the importance of artistically imbuing humanity into visions of brutality. When the first-person narrator of Arroyo’s stanza II recalls how watching the movie “Fried Green Tomatoes” makes her cry because “[h]e did the same to pregnant me. / Only our staircase spiraled,” the language itself evokes several pivotal insights (4-7). First, the narrator gives a contextualization for how violence against women works while also providing an example from popular culture to help others understand the impact of such violence. The movie, produced in 1991, contains depictions of domestic abuse that are situated in the first half of the twentieth-century. Yet, here, Arroyo’s poem demonstrates that these events are still being perpetrated. Second, the simplicity of the statement, “only our staircase spiraled,” belies the physicality of being pushed down a *spiral* flight of stairs: rather than falling forward, there is extra room in which the flesh tumbles and knocks. This fact leads to the third point that hits issues of apathy by recalling the insights of “theory in the flesh,” for the image produced here is neither simple nor artificial.

The apathy born as a result of structural sociosexual geo-racialization is similarly exposed within the processes of poetic *testimoniando*. One particular element that renders Puerto Rican women historically vulnerable to dehumanization is alluded to in this same line of the poem. The syntax of “pregnant me” illustrates that

pregnancy is the women's most important identifier: the speaker's reproductive status is detailed prior to her own sentient presence. Inherently linked to this conceit is its formation in Anglo-U.S. colonial matrices. Looking to historical writings to situate this element more concretely, in 1947, the U.S. journal, *Human Fertility*, published an article entitled "Birth Control in Puerto Rico" in which authors Christopher Tietze and Carmen de Alvarado provided "evidence" that identified controlling Puerto Rican women's fertility as a significant component of social domination. The take-away from this report is that a Puerto Rican woman's importance resides in her uterus: it is by and through this piece of flesh that she is known and labeled within an Anglo-U.S. colonial matrix. In Arroyo's poem, this fact manifests in its logical conclusion: a woman stripped of her identity and the respect for her sentient right to not be abused. The multiple elements that go into making each individual personality also reflect the various types of oppression that each woman faces. This layering effect indicates the insidious reach of power that is coupled with the various ways of keeping women disciplined and policed via the discourses defining their existences.

In consideration of how poetry can pressure this power, this poem's vitality, despite and perhaps *because* of its topic, emerges in its ability to also identify the significance of verbal abuse as an aspect of violence against women. When, in stanza III, one "invisible woman" describes how "[e]very time he yells 'estúpida' he stabs my head," and that she does not know how to "pluck out" the metaphorical—yet viscerally real—"porcupine quills," her experience shifts from verbal berating to one of sentient abuse (8-11). The poet maps a physical event that contains a flesh experience to illustrate how words have as much impact as physical battering. These lines also reflect how physical wounds might heal, but the psychological scars caused by such violent reductions and destructions remain. The function of verbal abuse as an aspect of violence against women illustrates another method through which misogyny impacts women's psyches in a patriarchal society. Diana Purvin explains that, among the survivors of domestic violence that she surveys, most register long term effects resulting from physical, mental and emotional abuse (198). Arroyo's depiction provides information as to how systematic abuse works and how it reaches its intended goal: destruction of sentient-humanity and the production of objects too

wounded to heal. Similarly, "the view of battered women as victims can lead to denial of support and services to women who act in ways other than those ascribed to 'good victims'—e.g., women who actively fight back or express anger rather than responding with passivity, fear or helplessness" (Purvin, 190). Arroyo's poem, in line with the functioning of poetic testimonio, critiques how the actions of the immediate oppressor work in conjunction with a larger system of power; beatings and verbally berating her are perceived as a result of this woman's own actions—such as being stupid—and inability to protect herself, but the poem places the blame on the fists that hit her and the words that violate her psyche.

The urgency to narrate these experiences using the vibrancy of poetry is exposed as an intrinsic element of these women's vulnerable positions and how this vulnerability stops these women from speaking. The narrator reveals "[i]t is not that newcomers aren't welcome" (17). The formation of this statement, moving from formally spelling out each word to collapsing words into contractions, indicates that the emphasis resides in explicating what these women are not attempting to do—exclude. The narrator thereby draws upon the ability for grammar to demonstrate social experiences, as Algarín and Piñero have described (19), to illustrate her own emotional landscape. The narrator adds that "[w]e are kind but our faces close. / You remind us of why we are here" (18-19). Each woman in the shelter represents and reflects the abuses that so many of the women have experienced in their own way and within their own specific situations. Their skin is where the discourses of violence and oppression are etched. The pain that each face reflects couples with issues of shame and embarrassment—of what they were not able to stop or avoid—and the ongoing trauma caused by this reality. And yet the need to speak and be heard permeates this section, illustrating the power that speaking out can hold in terms of using words to fight for sentience as indicated by Algarín and Piñero. Kimberle Crenshaw states that "[d]rawing from the strength of shared experience, women have recognized that the political demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices" (1241). However, even before the political consciousness that Crenshaw depicts emerges, a sensation of trust must exist among the women in order to provide a platform where they can speak to one another and feel comfortable sharing their experiences. The poet thereby

deploys poetry to identify the dehumanizing practices of discourse within structures of power. In what follows, I further examine how poetic testimonio elucidates this need for coalition and the difficulties faced by the limiting effects of sociosexual geo-racialization.

POWERFUL DIFFERENCE

While the dehumanizing processes that undergird systems of oppression are indeed felt within Latinas' lives between men and women, poetic testimonios also evince the impact of racism as it creates tension amongst women who suffer from domestic abuse. As Virginia Harris and Trinity Ordoña contend, women's ability to communicate is hampered by the realities of intersectionality and structural hierarchy (304). Thus, communication often breaks down in the face of these tensions. Indeed, the realities of sociosexual geo-racialization become problematic for women who seek to constitute a united front against patriarchy without addressing the differences between women. Norma Alarcón writes that:

The female subject of *Bridge* is highly complex. She is and has been constructed in a crisis of meaning situation which includes racial and cultural divisions and conflicts. The psychic and material violence that gives shape to that subjectivity cannot be underestimated nor passed over lightly. The fact that not all of this violence comes from men in general, but also from women, renders the notion of "common denominator" problematic. (359)

The variables comprising each woman's subject position raise issues regarding the similarities and differences that can be called upon to create "unity." What will be the one common identifier that will be used to gather individuals together, and what identity markers will be refuted in order to avoid "disunity"? The distinctions between how women experience sexism based off of access to power necessarily requires an understanding of how these positions will render new forms of sexism within this "gender" due to colonial matrix mappings.

It is important to note here that racism within the feminist movement demonstrates some of the limitations

faced by women of color—and for the purposes of this article, Latinas in general and Puerto Rican women specifically—when working with Anglo-U.S. women. Alarcón asserts that "*Bridge* leads us to understand that the silence and silencing of people begins with the dominating enforcement of linguistic conventions, the resistance to relational dialogues, as well as the disenabling of peoples by outlawing their forms of speech," and continues by noting that "Anglo-American feminist theory assumes a speaking subject who is [an] autonomous, self-conscious individual woman. Such theory does not discuss the linguistic status of the person. It takes for granted the linguistic status which founds subjectivity" (363). While poetry offers a vital discursive tactic for elucidating structures of power, it must also have within it an ability to identify the limitations of working within these structures and deploying their discursive formats.

As such, poetic testimoniando needs to go beyond illuminating colonial matrix mappings of power and identify the limitations they pose for women, women of color, and specifically Puerto Rican women. As testimoniadoras contend, this moment of speaking out is necessary. Alarcón's insights illustrate how Arroyo's poem, "days of dirt," defines the limitations constituted within the employment of colonial matrix discursive mappings can best be navigated within subversive discursive maneuvers. Drawing on the power of testimonio to expose power structures, the vitality of poetry to humanize the oppressed, and the need to actively voice the experiences of the flesh, this poem is indeed emblematic of a poetic testimonio that depicts how power and privilege construct hierarchies among women that further enhance misogynistic practices and destroy potential moments of coalition building against oppressive structures.

Arroyo's poem, "days of dirt," continues to expose the dehumanizing structures witnessed in "invisible women in the shelter" by identifying the limitations faced by the oppressed when utilizing the discourses that have formed within systems of sociosexual geo-racialized power. Specifically, this poem examines issues of racial hierarchies as they manifest among women despite similar experiences of gender violence. Continuing with her poetic exploration of domestic abuse shelters and the women who seek refuge in these places, this poem begins with the statement, "[a]nother one came in last night," in reference to a new woman joining the shelter (1). The narrator moves on to note how the blonde woman who

arrived brought three small children with her whose hair she dyed “brown as the colored people/[the blonde woman] confessed to hate” (14-15). Although the women in the shelter are all suffering from domestic violence, this blonde woman perceives herself as superior to the other women whom she feels privileged enough to despise. The word “colored,” harkening back to mid-twentieth century racial designations in the U.S., also brings forth all of the racism that this word entails. As a woman of color living in the United States, this word impacts and elucidates an element of the narrator’s and the blonde woman’s sociosexual geo-racialization. Crenshaw notes that a main problem with identity politics is that “it frequently conflates or ignores inter-group difference. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identity, such as race and class” (1242). No one woman experiences abuse in the same way as any other woman. While it cannot be argued that the punch of a fist hurts less because of the lightness or darkness of skin tone, the language of this poem exposes how racialization renders some women more vulnerable to institutional abuse and this abuse is then perpetuated within other social networks where these women attempt to survive.

Poetic testimonio can identify the insidiousness of colonial matrix mappings of power through discourse and the inherent limitations of utilizing these discourses. María Lugones writes of how “[w]e want to be seen unbroken, we want to break cracked mirrors that show us in many separate, unconnected fragments” and continues by describing how “to know me unbroken requires the kind of devotion that makes empathic and sympathetic thinking possible” (43). To be witnessed as a whole person is to be acknowledged as having an integral humanity deserving of respect. This poem’s language depicts the blonde woman’s disdain for women of color due to their skin tone and illustrates an intense racism that is inherent to processes of dehumanization and apathy.

Recalling the insights provided by theory in the flesh, Arroyo’s diction at this point in the poem exposes how the blonde woman’s self-perceived position of privilege impacts—as illustrated through her racializing discourses—her ability to work with women of color. The poet describes how the blonde woman is confused when “these battered women / —Verdean, Rican and

Korean— / stopped helping her” (17-19). Although the other women are geo-racialized—or given a racial category based on geographic signifiers—the blonde woman remains unidentified in her whiteness beyond noting her hair color. That she “wonders why” women whom she hates stop helping her demonstrates how racial structures permeate each individual’s life and how those who enact racial violence are able to dismiss the impact of their actions on the subjugated as unimportant. Hence, it is necessary to acknowledge how “intersection[s] of racism and sexism factor into [women of color’s] lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (Crenshaw, 1244). The blonde woman in this poem and the women of color she interacts with *are* different. That these women are further identified within “national” signifiers indicates the value of these designating terms in subjugating certain people. The narrator’s statement explicates what Lugones describes as a “racist ethnocentrism: ethnocentrism that is expressive of racism” (49). Furthermore, the blonde woman’s hatred toward these women demonstrates that even though they all suffer abuse that is institutionalized within their patriarchal society, they are not automatically allies.

Poetic testimonio, as manifested by this poem, emphasizes the significance of sociosexual geo-racialization in the creation of hierarchies that produce apathy and processes of dehumanization. The poet states that “one racial slur and two neglected/warnings later” the blonde woman was “forced” to move to another shelter (24-27). The language, here, evinces that solidarity cannot exist across racial lines that enable hatred based on skin color. The privilege that this one person evinces, through a perception of having a right to use racial epithets, indicates how race also functions to create silence among women who need to speak. In “Encountering Latin American and Caribbean Feminisms,” the authors state that there must be “strategies to address racism, heterosexism and other issues often marginalized from regional and national feminist agendas; and combat the invisibility of ‘Other’ women in the movement” (546). These movements must recognize the specificities and contingencies that make individual women’s experiences unique and worthy of attention. Furthermore, such awareness must have at its core respect for how these women contend with the multiple oppressions they regularly face. Thus, this poem’s language illustrates how the tensions that exist within

discourse play out: They contain hierarchical structures that enable the subordination of specific persons for the purposes of others to feel powerful regardless of the fact that all persons positioned as objects cannot actuate their full sentient-humanity within structures of domination. From within this position of drawing from the personal, the poem's narrator speaks to larger structures of power and domination. In the next section, I examine the potential that poetic *testimoniando* holds in subverting mappings of power.

SUBVERSIVE SPEAKING

The need to create a discursive format that the oppressed can use to express their sentient-humanity within a colonial matrix is a contradictory paradox.⁴ Theorist, bell hooks, describes how “[i]t was in the world of woman talk (the men were often silent, often absent) that was born in me the craving to speak, to have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to me” (207). The desire to speak and be heard as sentient is a crucial issue. Yet, buried within this desire is an understanding of how matrices of power dehumanize or manipulate humans into objects through tactics that have the appearance of endowing the oppressed with agency. As an example of this experience, hooks writes about how “I was never taught absolute silence, I was taught that it was important to speak but to talk a talk that was in itself a silence. Taught to speak and yet beware of the betrayal of too much heard speech” (208). hooks's statement here addresses the issue of how language and discourse simultaneously represent potential empowerment and the threat of exploitation that exposure makes possible.

The vocabulary employed to subvert structures of oppression and avoid reifying their limitations therefore must draw from the potential that speech holds rather than the threat of exposure that it also contains. hooks argues that lived experiences of oppression can lead to a “strength and power that emerges from sustained resistance and the profound conviction that these forces can be healing, can protect us from dehumanizing and despair” (209). Thus, it is a process of humanizing (rather than dehumanizing) that underpins a new discursive methodology bearing the potential that hooks indicates within her description of a voice that is recognizable as her own.

Yet, the insidious reach of colonial matrix discursive mappings is neither easily subverted nor challenged. Audre Lorde questions “[w]hat does it mean when the

tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” and answers this query by stating “[i]t means that only the most limited parameters of change are possible and allowable” (111). Systems that create master discourses also feed and (mal)nourish people living within these systems with specific values and stigmas. How is it possible for the oppressed to conceptualize language as having different purposes than those of colonial matrix exploitative designs? How is it possible to know that such potential can exist? How can the oppressed tap into the strength and transformation created within *dusmic* poetry?

Yet, a very significant issue arises as to the need to completely break with previous mappings of discourse. Lorde writes that “*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support” (112, emphasis in original). The seduction of power leads to the reenactment of these types of violence as they are legitimized within colonial matrix mappings. Even a mere taste of that power provides solace—it is always best to *not* be defined as completely and utterly vulnerable to exploitation even as that definition is exactly what working within structural power systems actually means. Arroyo's concluding poem of this collection, “gathering words,” illuminates the potential of poetic *testimoniando* in constituting a new discourse that both explicates the violence of sociosexual geo-racialization while also proffering a humanizing process that subverts objectification. This poem depicts the process by which poems manifest in the mouths, minds and hearts of women who refuse to be silenced, and instead seek the healing power of *testimoniando*. Written “para mami,” the poem begins by her stating, “One day I will write you a letter/ after I have gathered enough words” (1-2). She must find the combinations of syllables and stresses that will prove adequate to what she needs to convey and express. The narrator also illustrates the importance of a physical action to depict flesh knowledge of the emotional strength that is needed.

The words that the narrator ascribes to her experiences indicate the potential born within the praxis of *testimoniando* to create a new discourse rooted in her own interpretations of the forces acting upon her. She wants her words to “pop! pop! pop! / like little soap bubbles

escaping” (4-5). The onomatopoeia is conjoined with “soap” and illustrates the potential for cleansing made possible by finding a voice and discourse with which to speak. That the bubbles are popping provides a visual image: they are bursting and spraying—entering into the atmosphere and circulating with the other elements present in the air. The Latina Feminist Group describes how “through *testimonio* we learned to translate ourselves for each other” (11). Finding the words that explicate experience also illustrates how individuals understand themselves. As such, a methodology emerges through the use of poetry as *testimoniando* to not only describe events, but to also imbue humanity into those narrations.

Drawing from this potential, the poet goes on to emphasize *testimoniando* as vital for women of color in a violent society. She describes how “I listen to how voices ring / without the sting of *bofetadas*” (14-15). At the same time that she recognizes the need to cross borders in solidarity with other individuals, she also recognizes the importance of maintaining representations of her own culture/heritage as she experiences it. The word *bofetadas*—slaps, something that is experienced in the flesh—appears in Spanish, rather than in English, as the language that she inherits as a Puerto Rican woman. Although the poem is written in both an English version and a Spanish version in this collection, she chooses not to translate this word into English. The Latina Feminist Group states that “[t]he languages we speak come from our colonial and diasporic conditions. Some of us are Spanish dominant, others bilingual; some easily code-switch between English and Spanish; others struggle to learn Spanish or indigenous languages. A few of us negotiate multicultural situations ...” (8). Language reflects the avalanches of history that engulf each individual person and community. The narrator thereby conveys that her position as a colonized woman of color determines how she experiences the many violations enacted by structures of power.

The narrator also defines why it is essential for her—as a woman of color living in the U.S.—to utilize poetry as a method for creating bridges across racial, class and ethnic borders. Although she begins the final stanza repeating the phrase “One day, I will write you a letter,” a transition has occurred from the first line of the poem to this final repetition. She combines the phrase, “after I have gathered enough words,” with the line, “and enough courage,” to demonstrate that to do the former, she must have the latter

(20-21). The Latina Feminist Group questions “[h]ow can a feminist critical imaginary transform the societies in which Latinas live, love and labor? How can *testimonio*, as self-construction and contestation of power, help us build the theory of our practice, and the practice of our theory?” (19). Enacting *testimoniando* is not easy, and this moment draws attention to critics such as Daphne Patai who question the viability of the oppressed to narrate their experiences. The safety to speak is hindered by other women who enact oppressive behavior. Within the theorization of women speaking of their experiences is the added element of analyzing the mechanisms in place that attempt to abrogate these women from speaking from their individual sociosexual geo-racialized positions.

The narrator describes wanting to go “[t]o the lavandería with my bags of clothes/ and enough words and surrender myself to the bubbles” (26-27). Although potentially raising issues faced by women who speak of their experiences and are accused of “airing dirty laundry,” Arroyo’s image moves beyond this accusation and into a realm where she moves beyond victimization and toward a place of self-possession. Indeed, as scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Rosa Linda Fregoso have argued elsewhere, the use of “dirty laundry” as a metaphor for depicting the secrets that occur within the domestic sphere has long been a method for silencing women of color in their speaking out against domestic abuse. In direct contrast, this poetic *testimonio* ends where this collection of poetry begins: creating a dignifying linguistic praxis for refusing the apathetic structures that silence women of color to be the limits of their sentient potential. Here, Arroyo’s use of “I,” “my” and “myself” all reflect a self-awareness of herself as a person, a sentient human. She is therefore not the object of control and is, instead, the active person expressing agency.

TESTIMONIANDO

An examination of Arroyo’s poetry demonstrates the importance of *testimoniando* for understanding how women of color in the U.S. narrate their experiences of oppression through tactical navigations of hegemonic domination and silencing. However, her poetry also indicates the importance of situating the debates surrounding *testimonio* as resulting from a rupture in power dynamics and issues of who is allowed to speak, of what and when. Drawing upon the dusmic potential of poetry, as defined by Algarín and Piñero, enables poets

to engage the power of testimoniando to disrupt and subvert colonial matrix discursive mappings. Arroyo's poems, vividly depicting processes of dehumanization, racialization and gender violence, demonstrate the importance of words and language to express women of color's experiences while simultaneously working to avoid resituating these women as *only* victims. Further, these poems validate the resilience of surviving via her artistic poetic descriptions. Arroyo's poems demonstrate the violence of race and gender as intersecting aspects of identity while also refusing to allow one or the other to take preeminence over her ontological expression. This movement beyond colonial matrix discursive mappings indicates a shift in consciousness: a maneuver beyond the stagnant possibilities available within structures that rely on the exploitation and oppression of subjugated people. This rupture's potential, though not fully actualized in the physical and/or concrete societies in which Puerto Ricans live in the United States, demonstrate glimpses into how transformation of systematic violence can occur within the realm of language.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In their fact sheet for understanding domestic violence, Alianza identifies general population statistics for domestic violence and then offers specific information regarding Latino communities. Specifically, they identify issues of reporting domestic violence as a major factor impacting the ability to gather accurate statistics of this violence. Importantly, it notes that statistic gathering and the resulting data has produced in conflicts in relation to whether Latino communities have higher, lower or the same rates of domestic violence as those of Anglo-U.S. communities. Please see dvalianza.org for more information.
- ² This anthology has been reprinted twice, and currently is awaiting its fourth edition printing.
- ³ *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* provides an excellent overview of the debates that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* sparked in the U.S. academia. What Arturo Arias, editor of the former text, artfully illustrates is that these debates are not so much based on the need for "truth" to be paramount in any narrative of genocide. Rather, this anthology depicts the power dynamics that circulate around any text that challenges status quo politics in relation to the oppressed within colonial matrices speaking on their own behalf.
- ⁴ The term, "contradictory paradox," draws on two scholarly fields of inquiry: "contradictory" from Marxism and "paradox" from the social sciences, to distinguish between the conceptual and ideological differences of both, while also acknowledging how they work together in the case of women of color—specifically, Puerto Rican women—to construct an oxymoron in terms of challenging and subverting power structures from within colonial matrices.

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